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Follow Your Food: An Investigation of Podcasting to Communicate the Complexity of Food Choice and How It Impacts us, Our Communities and the Earth

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Follow Your Food

An investigation of podcasting to communicate the complexity of food choice and how it impacts us, our communities and the Earth

Abstract

This professional project explores the popular and relatively new media communications vehicle of podcasting to engage and inform the general public about the complexity of the food system. It has involved background research on the dynamics of podcasting from production to marketing and distribution, including surveys of academic literature and existing podcasts in the subject area, as well as informational interviews with several podcast producers. It has also included development and sample production of a potential podcast series, starting with a weeklong podcast training and concluding with a fully produced pilot episode, plus additional scripts using material from 11 audio interviews with practitioners and subject experts.

The resulting *Follow Your Food* is positioned as an immersive podcast about the influences on and impacts of our food choices on us, our communities and the Earth. Each episode will explore a different aspect of the big question: Can a plant-based diet save us? My approach has leveraged transdisciplinary food systems research combined with journalistic practices to investigate, dimensionalize and humanize this question. Preliminary response to the sample episode and overall concept demonstrates strong potential for a podcast series that brings to life for listeners the potential impacts of a livestock-free eating shift on the environmental, economic and socio-cultural landscape of Vermont, and also explore the ethical and health implications for Vermonters. More work needs to be done on evaluating communication efficacy of the podcast, including comparing different lengths, and developing a plan for production and marketing.

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I. OPPORTUNITY

1) People are inundated with information, often conflicting, regarding what should they eat for the benefit of the environment, for their health, for their community.

“Eat Less Meat: UN climate-change panel tackles diets,” proclaimed an August 2019 Nature magazine headline. “Is Grass-Fed Beef Really Better for the Planet?” asked NPR in an article posted just a few days later. These are but two examples of the media coverage deluge following the August 2019 release of an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, “Land and Climate Change,” which concluded that, “Balanced diets, featuring plant-based foods...with any animal-sourced food produced sustainably in low greenhouse gas emission systems, present major opportunities for adaptation to and limiting climate change.”

At the same time, another constant flood of media advises people what they should eat from a health standpoint: “6 Science-Based Health Benefits of Eating Vegan,” detailed a 2016 article by a registered dietician on Healthline.com. On the other hand, “The Brain Needs Animal Fat,” stated a March 2019 headline on the Psychology Today website.

Strong messages about dietary choice, leaning plant-based, continue to fill the media. The 2018 movie, *The Game Changers*, tackles the image of vegan eating as wimpy and unhealthy supported by the star power of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jackie Chan. Jonathan Safran Foer hit the airwaves at the end of 2019 to promote his new book, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*. In a September interview on PBS, he said, “Eating is a decision we make three times a day. And according to the IPCC, we have no hope of achieving the goals of the Paris Climate Accord, even if we do everything else, if we don’t really dramatically reduce our meat and dairy consumption.”

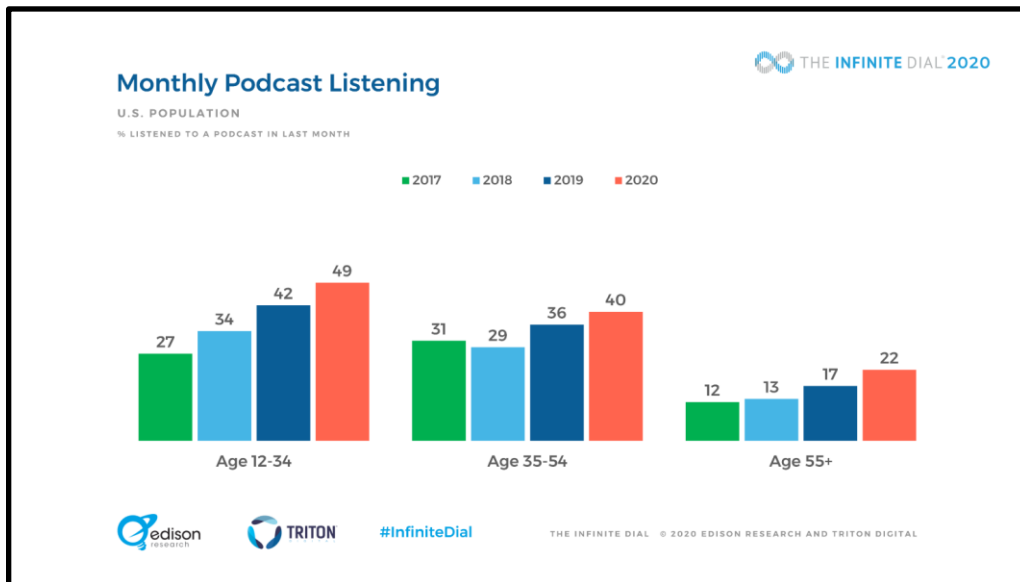
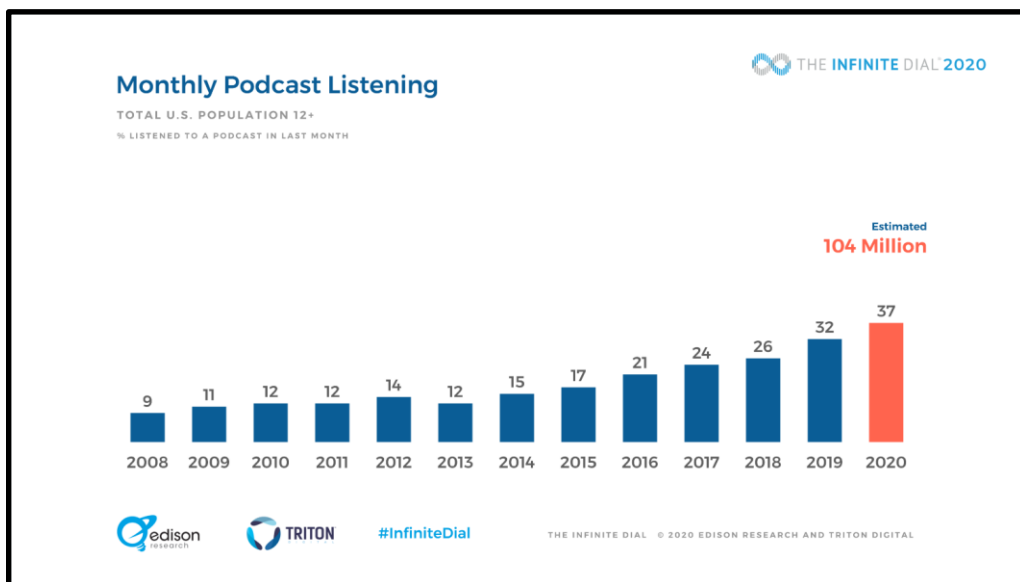
The Hartman Group, a national food and beverage industry research and consulting company, explained in its recent “Food & Technology 2019: From Plant-based to Lab-grown” report, that milk, meat, and dairy alternatives are growing swiftly. At the same time, meat continues to grow slowly while milk consumption is in decline. Their research shows that just over half of American consumers (51%) have purchased plant-based meat, milk or other dairy products in the last three months. These products, the report states, have gone mainstream.

For the average American, there have never been so many choices of what to eat—and so many sources of—often conflicting—information on how to make those choices. While much of the media coverage focuses on the environmental and health considerations of particular diets, there are also ethical, economic and socio-cultural dynamics at play. In Vermont, especially, agriculture contributes significantly, both directly and indirectly, to the state’s economic engine and cultural identity. The recent crash of the already-weak dairy market as a result of the pandemic has made headlines in Vermont as farmers have been forced to dump milk. “We will Lose Farms,” states the headline of a 4/10/2020 report on NBC, quoting farmer, Bill Rowell of Sheldon. The report details the challenges to both larger fluid milk dairies and smaller dairies producing added-value products like farmstead cheese. It concludes: “The dairy industry hopes public support plus government steps will protect a critical food sector and way of life in rural America.”

2) More people are listening to podcasts for both information and entertainment.

Increasingly, people are getting their information from non-print media. Specifically, there is huge growth in audio podcasts. According to a January 2019 CBS News poll, two-thirds of Americans listen to podcasts at least once in a while, including 23 percent who do so a few times a week. By comparison, a year ago, a majority of Americans said they never listened to podcasts.

In a nationwide survey conducted by Edison Research and Triton Digital in January and February 2020, 37 percent of Americans (104 million) age 12 and over responded that they listen regularly to podcasts. This marks a 16 percent increase from 2019. Listeners averaged more than six hours and six podcasts a week. Podcast listeners skew younger than the US population overall; the 12-34 age group makes up 48 percent of total monthly listeners versus 37 percent of the U.S. population. In addition, awareness of podcasting in the U.S. continues to rise with 75 percent of Americans age 12+ responding that they are familiar with podcasting, up from 70 percent in 2019.



The industry source Podcastinsights.com reports that education or “learning new things” is the second most oft-cited reason after comedy for seeking out podcasts. As detailed on Statista.com, “Podcasts are especially well-suited for long-form audio content such as interview formats and talks digging deeper into certain topics.” Unlike media that must be watched or read, podcasts are a perfect match for our multi-tasking lifestyle, allowing consumers to listen while also doing any number of other activities.

At the same time, the podcast field is becoming increasingly crowded. The established podcast hosting company, Libsyn, reports that the number of podcasts it hosted in 2019 has more than doubled since 2015, hitting 69,000 podcast shows last year versus 28,000 in 2015 (RAIN News, 2020). Of those, 60 percent reach their audiences via Apple Podcasts. (It should be noted that Apple does not publicly disclose the criteria on which they rank podcasts (Castos, 2020).)

There are several hundred listings of podcasts under the topic of food on platforms like iTunes. Many are focused more on the how-to of cooking, the gossip and business of restaurants or chefs, ingredient-specific stories or investigation of cuisines from different cultures. See below for a chart of the top ten on iTunes from the week of May 11, 2020 (Chartable.com). The only food podcast in the top 250 podcasts overall during this same period was *Home Cooking*. (Interestingly, a new arrival to the top 250 is *The MeatEater*, which is not just about eating meat but about all things outdoors including hunting, fishing and wild foods, as well as bigger-picture nature and conservation.)

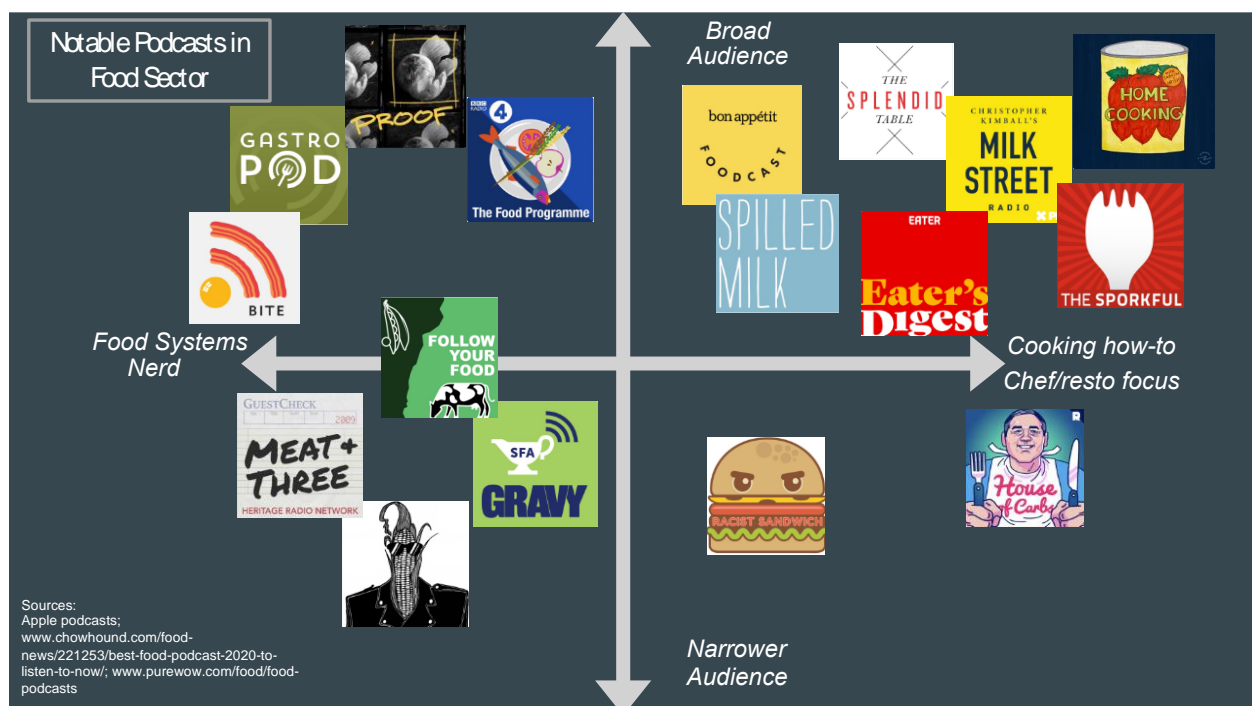
Rank	Podcast Title	Brief description
1	Home Cooking	Bestselling cookbook author Samin Nosrat cooks through quarantine with friend, podcast producer Hrishikesh Hirway
2	Proof	America’s Test Kitchen investigates backstory of food/drink
3	The Splendid Table	NPR radio show explores “intersection of food, people & culture”
4	Bon Appetit Foodcast	Interviews with chefs, writers, anyone “who has something cool to say about food”
5	Milk Street Radio	Christopher Kimball on “how food & cooking are changing lives & culture”
6	The Sporkful	TV Cooking Channel host talks about food “to learn more about people”
7	Breaking Bread w/Tom Papa	Comedian bakes bread and talks about food and drink
8	Gastropod	“food with a side of science and history”
9	Savor	How people eat and why – science, history, culture and how-to
10	Inside Trader Joe’s	Behind the scenes at the popular food chain

Source: Top 10 food podcasts on iTunes from week of May 11, 2020 (Chartable.com)

Few food-specific podcasts address broader food system issues in a compelling way that provides useful and actionable insights for listeners, but there are several that stand out and have provided some learning and inspiration for this project. The slickly produced [Proof](#) from *America’s Test Kitchen* takes a lesson from many popular general podcasts by framing investigations into specific foods as mysteries, or “hidden backstories”. [Gastropod](#) describes itself as “food with a side of science and history,” co-hosted by the articulate, warm and very

smart journalists Cynthia Graber and Nicola Twilley who met as UC Berkeley Food and Farming Journalism Fellows. The drier and more political [Bite](#) (which ranks 54 on this list) from *Mother Jones*, is hosted by food politics writer, Tom Philpott, along with the magazine editors, and promises to “uncover the surprising stories behind what ends up on your plate [and] explore[s] the politics and science of what you eat and why.”

Beyond food-specific podcasts, those with a science, environment and business emphasis do occasionally address food systems topics. Examples include a recent series by Bloomberg Environment titled, “[Business of Bees](#)” on how critical pollinators are the food system and The Food Programme from BBC did a two-part series in late 2019: [Eating Animals: The Future of Meat](#). Closer to home, Vermont Public Radio Vermont Edition and their podcast, Brave Little State, will occasionally address aspects of the local food and agriculture system, including a very recent example: “[In a Food Shortage, Could Vermont Farms Feed the Whole State?](#)”



II. How “Follow Your Food” will fill the need

The goal of my “Follow Your Food” podcast series is to fill the gap for a compelling, personality-driven, informative podcast that brings to life the complex dynamics underlying everyday dietary choices. The goal is to help people understand the drivers and impacts of the food system and enable them to make more informed decisions about what they eat. The style will be engaging and conversational, demonstrating depth of knowledge without being pedantic. While the stories will be grounded in—and leverage the food and farming credentials of—Vermont, they will transcend specific geography to illuminate many universal dynamics of the national food and agriculture landscape.

I am uniquely equipped to deliver on this through my experience as a Vermont-focused food and agriculture journalist now paired with a deeper understanding of food system complexity and

new tools developed as a master's student. Thanks to my coursework, I can now better evaluate both quantitative and qualitative research articles; understand the historic, economic, political and social and cultural context and structures that shape food systems; and have been able to step back from my journalism work to examine how media operates.

This project and support of the UVM Food Systems program has also enabled me to build my professional toolkit by experimenting with a new form of storytelling. For almost 20 years, I have been writing journalism stories about food and agriculture with a focus on the printed word. Although I have done some work in radio and a little in television, my emphasis has been largely shared through newspapers, magazines and some book projects. While this format has enabled me to share many stories that touch on food systems topics, including some related to dietary choice, it is missing an opportunity to communicate with many people, especially those under 35, who are disproportionately engaging with podcasts.

III. Process

1) Reviewed and researched food systems subject matter *May 2019-May 2020*

- Review of key literature and learning from Food Systems MS courses addressing the big picture of the food system, with particular focus on understanding perspectives regarding the role of animal products from environmental, nutrition and public health, socio-cultural, ethical and economic angles (see appendix). Settled on hook question: Will a vegan diet save us?
- Background interviews with academic or subject experts (e.g. Cherie Morse of UVM geography department, Lizzy Pope of UVM food science and nutrition department, Jenn Colby of Vermont Grass Farmers) to help frame issues and find experts for audio interviews
- Experiential research through committing to 3.5 week vegan diet and sharing the experience via a Seven Days [blog post](#)

2) Developed and built audio reporting and podcast skills

- *May 2019* — attended daylong Vermont Folklife Center workshop *Recording our Place: Telling Stories with Sound*.
- *July 2019* — completed weeklong SALT Institute of Documentary Studies at the Maine College of Arts course, *Introduction to Podcasting* (partially funded through the Food Systems scholarship fund). Taught by an NPR producer covering all aspects of constructing, reporting and editing a 6-minute audio narrative story in the NPR style. Reported and produced “Greener Pastures,” about a grass-fed beef farmer in Maine.
- *November-December 2019* — reported, scripted and produced 12.5-minute sample podcast, “Where’s the beef?”
- *Ongoing* — Leveraged networks for input/assistance/feedback from those with audio and podcast production experience including former VPR producer, Ric Cengeri; Richard Watts, UVM Reporting & Documentary Storytelling program; former Heritage Network podcast producer, Jordan Barry; video and audio editor, Kevin Barry; Mud Season producers, Leah Kelleher and Eliza Giles; UVM Extension Ag Engineering podcast

producer, Andy Chamberlin; Rumblestrip producer, Erica Heilman; interview shared by fellow UVM student of producer Angela Evancie of Brave Little State

- *November 2019-April 2020*—identified interviewees and conducted 11 audio interviews for potential use in podcasts.
 - Tyler Webb, grass-fed livestock farmer [November 2019]
 - Tyler Doggett, philosophy professor on ethics of eating animals [November 2019]
 - Kerry Detweiler, RD, the Edge [November 2019]
 - Johnson family, bean and grass-fed beef farmers [December 2019]
 - Mark Pasanen, husband, on vegan eating challenge [Feb 2020]
 - Nate Formalarie, Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing on value of agriculture and landscape [Feb 2020]
 - Lynn Ellen Schimoler, Vermont Agency of Agriculture/Working Lands Enterprise Group on contributions of agriculture [Feb 2020]
 - John Bagnulo, MPH, PHD, on non-mainstream approach to nutrition [Feb 2020]
 - Jessee Lawyer, Sweetwater's executive chef and citizen of Missisquoi Abenaki Band [March 2020] on role of wild fish and game in traditional foodways
 - Carolyn Hricko, former food system policy program manager at Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future & current UVM PHD candidate, on impact of dietary choice on environment and public health [April 2020]
 - Nancy Patch, Franklin/Grand Isle County forester, on role of forests/agricultural lands in Vermont [April 2020]
- *April-May 2020*—developed scripts for potential second episode of “Follow Your Food” featuring Jessee Lawyer, executive chef of Sweetwater's and member of the Missisquoi Abenaki band, plus Kerry Detweiler, R.D., and my husband re our vegan experiment

3) Completed literature review of academic research on podcasts

- *November-December 2019*
- Goal: In order to develop my podcast series more effectively, I wanted to understand the factors that influence people in their selection of and subscription to podcasts, particularly:
 - How do podcasts differ from traditional radio programming
 - The role podcasts fill within media consumption
 - How listeners find and select podcasts
 - What factors contribute to listeners developing sustained relationships with certain podcasts

4) Researched marketing and distribution possibilities

- *November 2019-May 2020*—researched via industry articles as well as informational interviews with podcast producers noted above in #2
- *January 2020*—had conversation with Paula Routly, publisher of Seven Days, re possibility of working with the alt-weekly to produce a food and agriculture podcast connected to my writing work with them

5) Evaluated impact of sample podcast episodes *December 2019-May 2020*

- Received feedback on sample episode from about 10 members of fall anthropology course plus students of two other courses during guest lectures, as well as several mentors and colleagues
- Developed list of about 20 students willing to give feedback on future episodes (unfortunately, pandemic precluded use of list)
- Organized event for fourth annual Vermont Public Philosophy Week scheduled for Monday, March 30 at 6 pm at the Richmond Community Kitchen (though, sadly, cancelled). *Vegan or Bust? listen, discuss, learn* — The decisions we make about what to eat are based on multiple factors from cost and convenience to ethics. We will start by listening to a short excerpt of a newly produced podcast series reported and created by local journalist and event host, Melissa Pasanen. Then we will dig into some of your ethical quandaries regarding how you choose what to eat. Do you prioritize the animals? The environment? Local farms and communities? Bring your burning questions and let's engage in a respectful discussion of priorities, challenges and opportunities.

IV. Learning

Key learnings from the process included insights from academic research in the field of podcasts along with several in-depth articles on the topic from the mainstream media. In addition, insights were gleaned from expert interviews with other podcast producers. The actual process of developing and producing a podcast also provided valuable information, as did feedback received so far on the sample podcast.

1) Literature Review

A. *How do podcasts differ from traditional radio programming and what role do they fill within overall media consumption?*

Aural media are an underappreciated but important part of people's daily lives.

Aural media are more flexible to consume than visual media and are often a background media because they can be absorbed while doing other tasks that require eyes. Radio and other audio media bridge the digital divide more than any other electronic medium due to their relatively low energy and technology requirements.

Podcasting builds on the heritage of radio, but is more than a new distribution channel for radio shows.

Audio-based media, traditionally radio but now also podcasts, are often associated with more intimate and authentic content. While some of the most popular podcast downloads are shows that also run in specific timeslots on public radio or other stations, podcasts are frequently distinctly different in scope and style from radio content. The particular media tool/platform has more impact than the specific content it delivers. As Marshall McLuhan famously wrote, "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964). Across a vast diversity of content, podcasts have cultivated a new relationship between listeners and aural media. Their approach is almost always more informal and conversational, and sometimes lower-tech, though less so as listener expectations increase. Interestingly, the success of this approach is now often reflected back in some radio show formats, which have taken note of podcasting success,

especially with a desirable younger audience. One UVM student said flat out: “Podcasts have replaced radio.”

Podcast listeners are different from radio listeners and the experience of listening to a podcast is different. Podcast listeners are younger and busier and also more purposeful, more engaged, and more autonomous in their selection and consumption of podcasts. McHugh (2016) calls it “an opt-in medium” (71). The experience of listening to podcasts is more individualized at many levels creating “a deeply personal and highly privatized (and intimate) space in which content is consumed” (Berry, 2016). Podcast and radio content share some basic similarities of technology, technique and content, but Berry also suggests that podcasting might have more in common with YouTube as “a source of disruptive innovation and alternative participatory practice” (18).

Unlike when tuning into radio, podcast listeners have much more over control their own listening experience: what they listen to, when, and how. (For example, they often speed it up.) Similar to radio, they can also control what else they are doing while they are listening (Tacchi, 2002; Perks & Turner, 2019; Sharon & John, 2019). Podcasts often help pass the time while doing necessary but routine daily activities like chores or commuting. In that regard, as Sharon and John (2019) point out that podcasts follow in “the well-established tradition of radio as an auditory escort that entangles itself within our daily routines ... a companion medium” (333).

Similar to the rise of blogs and self-published books for written word media, podcasting has chipped away at existing power dynamics in the sector by leapfrogging radio stations to provide a direct-to-consumer option for audio content in a vast variety of formats (Cwynar, 2019; Murray, 2019; Perks & Turner, 2019). Llinares (2018) posits that podcasting is a completely fresh aural culture, “a collection of cultural work and practice that spans journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education.” The relative lack of editorial oversight makes the medium more creative, daring, and “more radical and more culturally urgent than radio,” Llinares asserts.

Podcasts often have a more specific audience, hence the term “narrowcasting” in contrast to broadcasting or “demassification” of media described by Albarran, 2007 (as cited by Perks & Turner, 2019). Podcasting offers more customized and customizable audio production and the on-demand delivery mechanism empowers producers and listeners to make and consume a wider range of content on their own terms and form new relationships using aural media as the conduit.

B. How listeners find and select podcasts

Both the podcast audience and offerings continue to expand, presenting both opportunity and challenges for new entrants into podcasting. Thanks to accessible production tools, growth of sharing economies, widespread mobile connectivity, and improved clarity on ownership rights for digital streaming of radio, the number of new podcasts continues to grow (Murray, 2019). Huge corporations like Apple and Google still control the results of Internet searches for podcasts, which dominate the way most consumers find new podcasts. Of 1,500 respondents in a January/February 2019 poll (Edison, 2019), the top four ways respondents said they discovered podcasts were Internet searches (73%), social media posts (67%), friends and family recommendations (66%) and recommendations from other audio program hosts (62%).

Podcasting is still subject to the general rule that those in power seek control over media channels. While the tools of production have been democratized, platforms of marketing and distribution still favor those with financial resources and other conventional forms of social and cultural capital.

Marketing podcasts is more challenging in an increasingly crowded field. Search mechanisms for podcasts are in flux, requiring a podcaster to keep up-to-date on marketing tactics. Search technologies have been identified as a bottleneck hampering podcast listeners from finding what they seek, especially in an expanding “podosphere” (396) of widely divergent quality and substance (Besser et al., 2010). On The Current’s audio show, *The Pub*, host Adam Ragusea named it “the discoverability problem” (2017). Besser et al. (2010) detailed three strategies for finding podcasts: query-based search (person name, title, quotation, general topic and current issue/event), directed browsing, and requested recommendation. Word-of-mouth marketing is highly valuable and leveraged effectively by many content creators via social media (Cwyner, 2019; Samuel-Azran et al., 2018; Tsagkias et al., 2008).

Regarding financial resources needed to support podcasting, Cwyner (2019) noted that podcasting, like public radio, has undergone a commercialization with sponsorship and advertising. Murray (2019) described the resulting tension between editorial independence and sustainability. Unlike established media with sales and advertising divisions separate from editorial, the bootstrap nature of podcasting often involves the host also selling sponsorships literally and also verbally during the shows, thus chipping away at the traditional “wall” between content and commerce. Keiles (2019) explained that some large podcasts are supported by traditional media companies, but that many “podcasts that achieve solvency tend to do so through a stitched-together network of social-media hustles” (78). She also noted the rise in support via arts support platforms such as Patreon, through which creators can offer member benefits for monthly support that may be as low as \$1-\$5. Keiles reported that podcasts are the second-largest and the fastest-growing category on Patreon. Besser et al. (2010) noted that the trust devoted podcast listeners develop in their favorite hosts leads to a higher likelihood they will pledge financial support.

C. What factors contribute to listeners developing sustained relationships with certain podcasts?

There are some key differences between most broadcast radio and podcast-only shows in format and style that lead to success. The most successful, based on download numbers cited by Hill (2018), tend to fall into categories like true crime (Serial), famous personality-driven (Oprah, Joe Rogan), humor (Adam Carolla), and a variety of shows with NPR affiliation (This American Life, RadioLab, Planet Money). Format and execution vary widely. Some are more traditional broadcast radio formats also offered on-demand via podcasting. Many are host personality- and conversation-driven, unedited and often up to two hours in length. Others are tightly edited with traditional reporting mixed with some—often informal—narration or explainer-type journalism executed in a conversational tone.

Tsagkias, Larson, and Rijke indexed top podcasts against a matrix of attributes to identify key factors for success (2009). Their PodCred framework determined that content is ideally focused, factual and sourced with expert interviews and discussion. Podcasters are expected to be

articulate, conversational, share personal details and have credentials in the specified content field. Technical execution should include an opening jingle; sound and editing effects; and easy, efficient distribution. Regular releases—not necessarily that frequent but predictable—are important.

Communication style and the host appear to be as important to success as a podcast's content in many cases (Waters et al., 2012). Listeners expect a podcast host to have his/her/their own distinctive and appealing voice (Kern, 2012). Hosts, in most cases, play a central role in creating a signature style for a show, offering their own reactions, questions and concerns about the developing narrative or conversation (Besser, Larson, & Hofmann, 2010; Mead, 2018; Murray, 2019; Sharon & John, 2019). Chatty, irreverent but engaging, edutainment-style, narrative-driven are some other guiding adjectives (Cwynar, 2019; McHugh, 2016; Sharon & John, 2019; Tal, 2019).

Listeners do not necessarily expect podcasts to deliver objective insights; in fact, they expect a point of view. Podcasting, in this way, is similar to other social media such as blogs (Besser et al., 2010). The hallmark stylistic approach of many podcasts is actually attributed back to a public radio show that is also among the top downloaded podcasts: *This American Life* with Ira Glass, which began in 1995. Glass is credited with introducing the idea of a host who does not shy away from subjectivity nor hide a personal investment in the story being shared (Llinares, 2018).

The desirability of an authoritative voice has changed over time. Euritt (2019) points out that “radio created a culture of sound that endowed authoritative voices with the trustworthiness to represent the public to itself. As constructions of authority have changed, the qualities of that voice have changed” (356). In many cases, the host(s) is/are learning along with the listener, not lecturing or speaking from a position of all-knowing authority. It can be a fine line between demonstrating expertise but not showing off too much knowledge: “It may be necessary to ‘play dumb’ to a certain extent” to more clearly communicate and resonate with listeners, notes Kern (2012, 52). Mead (2018) quotes Michael Barbaro of The Daily podcast: “Traditional journalism is all about delivering a final product to an audience and saying, ‘Trust us, here’s our omniscient authority that we have earned.’ Podcasting is, by definition, a more vulnerable, transparent medium. You can hear the reporter’s uncertainty” (18).

Many podcast listeners develop strong bonds to the hosts of shows to which they subscribe. As detailed by journalist Jamie Lauren Keiles (2019), “all across the podcast realm, from the heights of self-help to the depths of true crime, imagined relationships are blossoming” (76). She quotes a producer who notes that these imagined relationships grow in part due to the fact that host voices are interwoven into the daily lives of listeners: “You’re in the shower with them. You’re on their commute to work” (76).

The dynamic is not new to podcasts. Research has explored this kind of relationship back to the mid-1950s across a range of traditionally non-reciprocal media from television to radio (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tacchi, 2002). The concept of parasocial relationships was identified by sociologists Richard Wohl and Donald Horton (1956) who described television hosts and entertainers breaking the fourth wall to directly address their audience. This created a sense of a

two-way relationship and “intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word” (221). In her study of relationships developed by devoted radio station listeners to their favorite stations, Tacchi (2002) notes that they might be “different from face-to-face social relationships [but are] nonetheless real” (255).

Keiles (2019) suggests that podcasts are “even better poised to foment this kind of bond” (76) with their conversational and intimate tone. Personal revelations only serve to intensify the intimacy already attributed to radio, which is further heightened by the frequent use of headphones for podcast listening, as if creating a sound cocoon inhabited by the listener and the podcaster (Llinares, 2018; McHugh, 2016; Mead, 2018). Perks and Turner (2019) use the term “media companionship” (109) which encompasses parasocial relationships, loneliness mitigation, or other feelings of sociability. Twenty-four percent of respondents in the 2019 podcast listener poll indicated they listen to podcasts for companionship (Edison, 2019).

Many popular podcasts give listeners a sense of belonging. It’s as if they are sitting in the room during a private, tell-all conversation or, “chumcast” (70) as McHugh (2016) calls it. Sharon and John (2019) say that “the personal topics of conversation, the dialogue among hosts (or among hosts and guests), and commonalities between host and listener can all present invitations for intimacy” (334). The perception of a two-way relationship between listener and host(s) deepens feelings of intimacy, loyalty and builds expectations of personal revelations from the host (Besser et al., 2010). When hosts display their own vulnerability, ignorance and doubt, listeners feel part of a shared journey (Llinares, 2018; McHugh, 2016).

2) Expert Interviews

Interviews with four podcast producers in Vermont underlined many conclusions from the academic literature, with some additional insights into production, marketing and financial realities.

Andy Chamberlain, producer of UVM Extension Ag Engineering podcast, noted that podcasters must make sure metadata, tags and keywords are complete for most effective searching. He also discussed the important of social media to market the podcast to farmers in his target audience and setting up a website on which to host episodes and post related materials. His project is grant-funded at this time but after the initial two years, they hope to be able to secure sponsorship. He noted that the production of each episode (which are pretty straightforward edited interviews) takes about double the time of the actual interview process. He also shared specific, useful details of how podcast host services work.

Erica Heilman, host and producer of Rumblestrip, spoke to the value of aligning herself with “group of likeminded podcasters,” who help to promote each other’s work. She also said having a website and a newsletter to announce new episodes and other news is an important part of maintaining connections to listeners. She sells merchandise, though she isn’t very excited about that. She had recently raised \$6,000 during a short-term campaign for cover her costs for the immediate future. She also thinks she could use social media better to promote, but is not that comfortable doing so. Erica talked about being true to yourself and your goals: “You have to be you,” she said. She believes that developing a certain signature sound is more important than consistent length, although she thinks those should not vary wildly.

Angela Evancie of VPR's Brave Little State spoke with my fall anthropology course colleague, Ian Bachand, who generously shared the interview transcript with me. Angela underscored what Erica said about the importance of a website and sharing the work of other podcasters who she admires; she does that via social media. She spoke about how the BLS approach of building episodes around a listener question helps make personal connections and builds an invested group of listeners. The structure also helps the host/producers create an intimate and direct connection to the listener: "I guess we're trying to make our show so that it points directly at a person....So no matter who has got us in their ear bud...I want them to feel like, 'Oh, I understand how I connect to this story. They're talking to me.'" Interaction via social media reinforces these relationships. She noted that especially with on-demand media like podcasts, "You can't take your listeners for granted."

Eliza Giles of Mud Season shared some helpful specific technical advice about field recording, hosting details and how to use keywords to meet search engine criteria. She discussed Mud Season's partnership with VPR, for which they produce much shorter formats, more traditional for radio reporting: four minutes versus 20-minute episodes. Mud Season has grant funding. She also spoke about utilizing networks for marketing like UVM and the Center for Research on Vermont newsletter. Leah Kelleher, also of Mud Season, gave me very specific feedback on my sample podcast.

3) Learning from podcast production and feedback on first episode

The actual process of reporting, scripting and producing a podcast provided key insights into how to leverage my strengths, areas on which I need to work, and, most importantly, if I can even do this at all. Most important, it helped me understand exactly what is involved in this new form of media.

- Reporting for audio is different than reporting for print.
 - Interview not only seeks information but must also elicit personalities and liveliness of conversation that will keep listeners engaged.
 - Technically, the quality of the resulting podcast relies on how well sound is captured in the field, both spoken word and ambient sound.
- Scripting is similar to pulling a written article together, but also different.
 - Absorbing information aurally is different than reading it. Need to understand better how much complexity can be communicated in one episode.
 - The use of paraphrase and writer/host explainers is different.
 - Pacing is critical and can only really be grappled with during audio production when it becomes clear if a quote is too long, or a transition too abrupt, or a transition sound is needed.
- The process of audio production/engineering is time-consuming with the highly edited format I have targeted, versus the more freeform conversation style of some podcasts. While I have learned a lot and did OK, there's a ton more to learn and I'm not very efficient at engineering while on this learning curve.
- Feedback from listeners on first sample episode was generally very positive. Listeners said it was engaging and educational (i.e. "it made them think about the issue in a different way").

- Although I thought it was shorter than my actual episodes would be, many listeners said it was about right with a good number of voices and issues to absorb.
- Even though I thought my sound effects might be silly, most people seemed to feel they added energy and contributed to engagement.
- Students and others who have listened to my sample appreciated when they could hear the relationship between me and the people I was interviewing.
- Overall, the listeners with more technical skills thought I did a strong job given my inexperience. Suggestions included tips on how to get more even sound levels in the field and better quality (no popped P's!) my own narration recordings. (While some inconsistencies can be fixed in editing, not all can be.) In addition, I need to work on smoother transitions and more use of background music.

V. Application of Learning

In response to all of the learning noted above, I focused on the following as I refined my project deliverables.

1) Production

- **Focus on interviewing, scripting and recording narration with emphasis on a personable, relatable, conversational style including personal perspective and experience.** Show some expertise but also learn along with the listener. Keep some interpersonal “play/fun” in the interviews.
- **Rethink length and scope of each episode.** While time constraints are more fluid than radio, a series should have a general format length and not diverge too much without very good reason (Tsagkias et al., 2009). I was thinking each episode would be roughly 35-45 minutes, but research shows that podcasts have actually been getting shorter and the podcasters I interviewed mostly shoot for closer to 20-25 minutes.
 - The first shorter script addressed mostly the ethical question of eating animals with a little about the environmental impacts. It focused a farmer/producer and an academic authority.
 - For my second script, I tried two versions. One involved just material from the interview with chef Jessee Lawyer and the socio-cultural impacts of sovereignty over food choice. A second version pared back the Jessee material a bit and added excerpts from the interview with Kerry Detweiler, RD, as well as my husband and I talking about the health implications. It focused more on the eater's perspective – Jessee as an Abenaki, Kerry's focus on what her clients experience, and our experience trying to be vegan.
 - My original idea of a paired set of episodes that track a beef and bean burger from farm through body seems like a lot to fit into one episode, though it might be a good thing to try. I still like the parallel nature of this comparison, but it might be too much information to share effectively. Because listeners are often multi-tasking, podcasters should be careful not to inundate their listeners with too much information (Waters et al., 2012). UVM students brought up the pluses and

minuses of multi-tasking while listening to podcasts. One said she finds podcasts more accessible than other media because she can listen when doing other things. However, another said she often found that podcasts contained too much info to process when doing other things.

- **Recognize that I could benefit from help on the technical production side.** Although I did successfully complete the initial production of my sample podcast with minimal expert help, developing that skillset is a significant task. While some earlier podcasts might not have offered great audio quality and polish, listeners have grown more demanding in that regard. The appearance of casual conversation and informality belie the attention to detail required to create a compelling episode with close attention needed to tempo, ambient sounds recorded in the field along with appropriate sound effects and use of music. Ambient sounds are important because they produce a sense of “being there” and authenticity of the story (Euritt, 2019). They also give the listener prompts that help to exercise his/her/their imagination (Cwynar, 2019). The learning curve here is steep. I learned that audio quality starts in the field and I am far from expert at managing recording levels out in the world. I was lucky to have some friends/colleagues with audio production expertise but for ongoing viability, working with an engineer would be ideal.

2) Marketing and Distribution

Given the increasingly crowded podcast space (RAIN News, 2020) and time/money required to not only produce but market a new media entity, I confirmed by expectation that it will be critical to have a partner. I am hopeful that my promising conversation with *Seven Days* can still lead to a potential project. Recent conversations indicate that some focus on restaurants and chefs might help make that more fundable and marketable. This is one of the reasons I scripted my second episode with a focus on a Vermont chef who also helps illuminate the socio-cultural aspect of food choice.

VI. Limitations

- Originally, I had planned to deliver two produced audio episodes and had done all the interviews needed (plus some!). Due to accepting a full-time food journalism job to help cover food systems issues during the last month of this project, my advisor and committee chairs agreed that one produced episode and scripts for a second would be acceptable.
- I was obliged to complete the last two interviews via phone rather than in person due to pandemic. However, this turned out to be a good learning experience on how to capture audio well via phone.
- I did not get as much feedback on produced podcasts as I had hoped. Partly, this was due to not completing a second longer podcast for comparison. But, also, I was not able to take advantage of the list of volunteers from my fall course, nor get the public feedback I would have received during the planned Public Philosophy Week event.

VII. Next Steps

- Produce second sample with completed audio interviews – hopefully to pair with future print story for *Seven Days* addressing the question of whether going vegan could be the answer, in which (pre-pandemic) there was definite interest.
- Develop a research plan to get listener feedback on shorter versus longer podcast formats and how effective each is to engage and educate on food system choices.
- Explore further the opportunity to deploy newfound audio reporting skills in partnership with pair of *Seven Days* colleagues who have audio production experience. Possibly try out some shorter chef-focused pieces, including use of audio interview done with Jesse Lawyer.

VIII. Appendix

1) Podcast sample #1: script and SoundCloud link:

Follow Your Food sample episode – audio on SoundCloud - [Where's the beef?](#)

2) Podcast sample #2b script – Food, Power and Nutritional Yeast

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### **FOLLOW YOUR FOOD**

#### **A podcast for thoughtful eaters**

Hosted by Melissa Pasanen

Sample episode 1: ***"Where's the Beef?"***

[Sound – sizzle of hamburger]

Melissa: (stand-up) Is your mouth watering? [more sizzle] That's the sound of a burger sizzling in a hot skillet.

Problem is, that burger just might be the death of us. I'm sure this is no surprise to you. It's all over the news. Here's NBC from October 28th of this year.

NBC Announcer: The effects of climate change are rapidly altering our planet and to stem the decay we have to rethink several aspects of modern life. That includes our food system, which accounted for a whopping 37% of manmade greenhouse gas emissions from 2007 to 2016.

Melissa: (stand-up) For the burger-lovers among us, the extra bad news is that the cows that produce the beef and cheese for our cheeseburgers have been blamed for a significant chunk of those emissions.

Of course, the impact of what we eat goes beyond the environment. There's the obesity epidemic that's become a public health crisis. There's also what some call an ethical crisis: how farmed animals are treated in the industrial food system. Then there are social and economic crises facing rural America.

Insert head exploding emoji here.

[explosion sound]

[theme music here]

But stay with me. My name's Melissa and I've been writing about food and agriculture for almost 20 years here in Vermont. I'm working on a new podcast series called *Follow Your Food* that will try to sort through the information overload and answer the big questions swirling around what we eat.

Will going vegan save us? What would Vermont look like if there were no livestock at all? Can the right kind of farming really help ease climate change?

The goal is to help us all understand the impact our food choices make on us, our communities and the world.

In this mini sample episode, we're going to start with something hopeful. I'm calling it "Where's the beef?" (which is an archaic reference to a 1984 Wendy's burger chain slogan.)

[Sound – "Where's the beef?"]

Or A Tale of Two Tylers. That'll make sense in a sec.

[Sound – cow mooing.]

Melissa: (stand-up) Oh, there's the beef.

I took a trip to visit some cows in Fairfield, Vermont. Stony Pond Farm is the kind of farm highlighted in that October NBC News piece.

NBC Announcer: That's why some farmers are turning to what's called regenerative agriculture, a set of farming practices aimed at capturing carbon in the soil and drawing it out of the atmosphere.

Melissa: The whole environmental question is a huge one and we'll dig into that in a future episode. Right now, we're going to talk to farmer, Tyler Webb, and a philosophy professor, Tyler Doggett, to dig into this episode's big question: If you're going to eat animals, is free-range better from an ethical standpoint?

Melissa: [stand-up] Tyler and Melanie Webb run a small-scale, grass-based, organic dairy and beef operation about 20 miles north of Burlington, Vermont.

[Sound – farm truck.] It was a late fall morning when we hopped into Tyler’s farm truck and he drove us from one part of the farm to another to visit the beef herd.

Tyler W: 0:07 [62] We’re headed down Chester A. Arthur Road.

Melissa: 0:10 [62] And tell me, who was Chester A. Arthur?

Tyler W: 0:13 [62] One of our forgotten presidents...an early president born here in Fairfield, Vermont.

Melissa: [stand-up] Tyler parked next to a big, old barn and we climbed over the electric fence into a pasture the Webbs rent from retired dairy farmers. The surrounding hills were covered in the reds and golds of peak foliage.

Melissa: 0:01 [63] The cows are coming towards us. Now they’re stopped. They’re like, ‘Who the heck are you?’ Wait, we know you on the right side with the beard.

Melissa: [stand-up] Tyler and Melanie have been farming for about 15 years. They believe strongly in the power of grass-based livestock agriculture to produce good food for people, regenerate the soil, and provide the best life for their animals.

Tyler W: 02:28 [57] We bust butt seven days a week, 12 hours a day to foster and create a really high-quality life for our bovine partners here in exchange for them converting grass energy into people energy.

[Sound – cows moving through pasture.]

Melissa: [stand-up] Tyler was moving the herd to a new paddock. The farmers do that daily to provide the most nutritious food for their animals and give the pastures a chance to rest and regrow between grazings.

Melissa: 0:10 [64] Cows following us like we are the Pied Piper to the new paddock.

Tyler W: 0:25[65] They’ve all followed us over here because they know that fresh green grass lies on the other side. And with one little whistle [whistle....moo], these girls are going to get some fresh green grass.

|          |            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Melissa: | [stand-up] | All of Stony Pond's cows have names, often given to them by Tyler and Melanie's kids. Tyler pointed out Baskin Robbins at the front of the pack.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Tyler W: | 0:28 [63]  | We must have been really tired that day. We can't come up with a name....(0:41) Where did Baskin come from. I really don't know. She's a character. She's growing into that name for sure.                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Melissa: | [stand-up] | But farming livestock means that even cows with names may end up sizzling on a grill at some point.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Tyler W: | 01:44 [70] | We kind of balance all of our decisions on a three-legged stool, always trying to take into account: ethics, ecology, and, unfortunately, economics.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Tyler W: | 02:06 [70] | Our burger enterprise, which is fairly popular at the Burlington farmer's market, is primarily composed of cull dairy cows.... A cull would be any reason for having a cow leave your herd.... The primary reason for leaving our herd is either a really, really crankerpuss attitude where they're too challenging to milk or participate within our system, or they're not bred in our seasonal window. |
| Melissa: | [stand-up] | At Stony Pond, they breed with bulls, not artificial insemination like many dairy farmers. They aim for a calving season that takes advantage of Vermont's peak grass production. Tyler explained it's similar to the natural breeding cycle of wild ruminants like white tailed deer.                                                                                                                     |
| Tyler W: | 03:23 [70] | You know, from an ecological perspective, it doesn't make sense to keep an animal around that's not working within the sort of harmony of our natural system.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Melissa: | [stand-up] | Recently, they had to cull a cow that Melanie really loved. The kids took it better than their mom did.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Tyler W: | 04:37 [70] | And then there's the ethical--which is the most challenging question within this three-legged stool--is how do we, how do we come to grips with parting with an animal that's still in a healthy, viable physiological state?                                                                                                                                                                              |

- Tyler W: 06:47 [70] It almost seems the most honorable thing for us instead of just sending her off to some other farm, to some other place, is to move her through our burger program so that folks in Burlington can support our herd and support our farm and support our work on this landscape and enjoy some really high-quality meat.
- Melissa: [stand-up] The bottom-line is Stony Pond's cows exist to provide food and the Webbs are straightforward about that.
- Tyler W: 04:59 [70] For us, we have always viewed our herd as a herd. It's easy to anthropomorphize, you know, especially with our cows all having individual names, they all have individual cowanalties and behaviorisms and—
- Melissa: 05:22 [70] Wait! Cowanalties?!
- Tyler W: [05:24](#) [70] Sure. Well, they're not people...It's easy to put and attribute a personality to a cow, but a cow isn't a person. They have their own cowanalties.
- Melissa: [stand-up] And that, in a nutshell, illustrates the belief that allows some of us to eat animals: They're not people. To help us sort through this premise from an ethical standpoint, I sat down to chat with Tyler number two.
- Tyler D: 0:23 [76] My name is Tyler Doggett. I'm a philosophy professor of at UVM and amongst the philosophical questions I'm interested in are a bunch of questions in food ethics.
- Melissa: 02:09 [77] Is there one fundamental ethical question that underlies the decision or the debate about eating animals?
- Tyler D: 02:20 [77] Ooh. Um, I'd be surprised.
- Melissa: 02:29 [77] Let me suggest it, perhaps, is do we consider animals lesser beings that allow us to say it's okay to eat them, right?
- Tyler D: 02:51 [77] I think for the vast majority of people it's very clear that there'd be something very seriously, morally wrong about a system of raising human beings and then killing them and consuming their corpses... There must be some difference between creatures like you and me and Tyler Webb on the one hand and pigs and chickens and cows on the other hand, which explains why it's okay to hurt, raise and kill

one but not hurt, raise and kill the other. What is that difference? ... Did I pass the quiz? [laughter]

- Melissa: 04:01 [77] You did, Professor... You just posed a question. I know the answer to that is multilayered, but has something to do with: Are animals sentient beings?
- Tyler D: 04:24 [77] People who are in favor of killing animals for food often they become like extremely concerned with the wellbeing of plants in a way that strikes me as maybe not entirely in good faith. And so they'll say things like, if there's something wrong with killing cows, isn't there also something wrong with killing kale? ... And it's because cows have consciousness and kale doesn't, that explains why there's something wrong with killing cows but nothing wrong with killing kale.
- Melissa: [stand-up] For people who decide it's ok to eat other sentient or conscious beings, the next question might be: is it ethically better to eat animals that have been treated more humanely?
- When I visited with Tyler number one on Stony Pond Farm and we were standing in the field with his herd, he said:
- Tyler W: 07:34 [70] We're proud of the quality of our burgers... The burgers are certainly advertised and marketed as free range from super happy cows. And as we wander around these paddocks, you can see the girls are pretty happy, I would say super happy. And they're without a doubt free-range.
- Melissa: [stand-up] And here's what Tyler the professor said:
- Tyler D: 08:56 [77] I think if you're going to kill an animal no matter what, your choice is just how to treat the animal, then morally speaking, you should give the animal a better life rather than a worse life and free-range farmers do that. Absolutely.
- Melissa: [stand-up] Well, that's a relief – for those of us who have the access and ability to buy that kind of meat. More on that later.
- But... then I ventured into ethical questions beyond eating animals. How about the ways humans are treated in some areas of food production, I asked...

- Melissa: 12:37 [77] ... How do you deal with animals who might get in the way of vegetable farming: insects, rabbits, woodchucks? Last but definitely not least, there is an ethical component to the environmental implications of what people are choosing to eat, right?
- Tyler D: 14:01 [77] I think those are all very important questions. The insect question is like truly terrifying if you start to push too much on insect sentience. And I do think there's a temptation to think, oh, just stop eating animals, animal products and you are eating in some morally impeccable way and there is no way that that is correct.
- Melissa: [stand-up] So, I don't know about you, but, from an ethical standpoint, I've decided I'm OK with eating animals that have enjoyed a good life while on this earth. That kind of beef does cost more but I'll eat less of it, which has some other benefits we'll talk more about in future episodes.
- I'm also sort of fascinated by the idea of insect collateral damage. Like is my bean burger actually worse to eat because the farmer was obliged to kill thousands – maybe millions? – of insects to get those beans and veggies successfully through a growing season for my plant-based dinner?
- We'll end on that cliffhanger. Please subscribe to *Follow Your Food* to continue on this journey with me exploring the implications of what we eat and, hopefully, helping all of us make choices that align with our priorities.

#30#

## **FOLLOW YOUR FOOD**

### **A podcast for thoughtful eaters**

Hosted by Melissa Pasanen

Sample episode #2: ***Food, Power and Nutritional Yeast***[*SOUND: pans in kitchen* Jessee L interview 1: ([04:51](#)) or ([06:59](#))]

Jessee ([00:27](#)): Hi, my name is Jessee Lawyer. I'm the executive chef at Sweetwater's American Bistro in Burlington, Vermont. I'm also a citizen of the Missisquoi Abenaki band in Swanton, Vermont.



Melissa [stand-up]: And I'm Melissa Pasanen. I know Jessee through my work writing about restaurants, food and agriculture, which I've been doing for about 20 years here in Vermont.

Jessee (00:39): Today we are going to be cooking a little bit of walleye with some other native ingredients.

Melissa [stand-up]: That's Jessee back in March in the kitchen at Sweetwater's. He had agreed to make something inspired by his Abenaki heritage after responding to an Instagram post in which I'd shared I was going vegan for a month – more on that in a bit.

In that same post, I polled folks to see how many had considered cutting back or eliminating animal products from their diets. This very unscientific research yielded about two dozen responses. Jessee was among a distinct minority who responded no, and I was curious about his thinking.

I'm curious in general about how people make decisions about what to eat. Are they motivated mostly by their health? By the environmental impact? By cost and convenience? By supporting local farmers and food producers?

Or, as Jessee explained to me, maybe some, like him, are trying to preserve connections to their culture or family through food.

Jessee (15:42): The last 400 years or so... through assimilation, intermarriage, a lot of our ways have been lost and especially at the forefront: foodways.

[SOUND: series theme music]

Melissa [stand-up]: In my new podcast series, *Follow Your Food*, I'm trying to sort through the big questions swirling around what we eat. The goal is to help us all understand the impact our food choices make on us, our communities and the world.

One of the biggest questions in food right now is if going vegan could save us, mostly from an environmental and health perspective. But Jessee personally rejects the idea of going vegan. He sees procuring, cooking and eating wild-caught meat and fish as integral to honoring his heritage. He also sees it as positive way to create sustainable relationships between generations, and between humans and the environment.

Jessee (Interview 2 06:58): The base I feel of any indigenous culture is the culture on the land. And a big part of that culture on the land is hunting, whether it's hunting above water, hunting below water, whether it's trapping, whether it's wild edibles ... It's all ridiculously important to the culture and continuing the culture.

Melissa [stand-up]: The bottom-line is that if we're trying to understand why people eat what they eat, we need to acknowledge that those decisions often have deep cultural and psychological roots. If you see eating meat as essential to your heritage, for example, and someone suggests

that you should stop for the sake of the environment or your health, you just might tell them to go jump off a cliff, or worse. (Not that Jessee ever did that.)

Jessee told me about Sean Sherman, a member of the Oglala Lakota and a leader among the Native chefs who are reclaiming traditional foodways for the benefit of both the physical and spiritual health of their people.

In his cookbook, Sean writes: “The U.S. government forced our ancestors from the homelands they farmed, foraged, and hunted, and the waters they fished. Displaced and moved to reservations, they lost control of their food and were made to rely on government-issued commodities...all lacking nutritive value. Controlling food is a means of controlling power.”

I just want to repeat that last sentence because it says so much about how important food and people’s choices over food are to them: Controlling food is a means of controlling power.

Sean Sherman is talking about the experience of Native and indigenous communities, but this idea of food agency, having control over what and how you eat, came up again and again during the many conversations I had with people for this podcast series. It’s something that a lot of us take for granted, but we may not realize how much our food choices are actually influenced by things beyond our control.

Jessee did tell me he was trying to eliminate conventionally farmed meat from his diet, just not wild-caught meat or fish. But there are plenty of other people who push back when someone suggests they reconsider meat. Sometimes it’s about craving a particular taste or texture, but just as often, the reasons are much more complex. Food choices are not just about food.

Yes, that’s a lot to chew over [*SOUND: joke drum roll in possible sound effects episode 2 folder – if use, note: Royalty free music from <https://www.fesliyanstudios.com>*]. For right now, let’s get back to Jessee and something we can actually chew on: the delicious walleye he was cooking.

Melissa (00:45): So, for those who may not know what walleye is and cannot see the beautiful long white filet. Tell us what it is.

Jessee (00:55): It is a fish, you find them in the lakes and then in the rivers during spawning season. They are native to the area and most of Eastern United States...a very important food source for our people and my favorite fish.

Melissa [stand-up]: Jessee was also working with some other native ingredients.

Jessee (02:11): Wild rice flour, a little maple sugar, sweet fern and salt.

Melissa (02:22): Tell me about that.

Jessee (02:28): So just take dried wild rice, throw it through the Vitamix until it is super fine, put it through a sieve and then mix it with whatever spices I choose.

Melissa [stand-up]: He had mentioned sweet fern, which I didn't know and looked up later. Turns out it's a member of the bayberry family and native to North America.

Jessee ([02:45](#)): Very aromatic. I find it's kind of similar to tea, so it's nice on fish.

Melissa ([03:00](#)): Let me smell. Oh. Oh. I super-smell that wild rice.

Jessee ([03:05](#)): Very earthy.

Melissa [stand-up]: When I first talked with Jessee about cooking something from his heritage, he thought he could source some wild game, but the timing didn't work out.

Jessee ([03:51](#)): I was trying to get some beaver from some local trappers. [4:11] If this was two weeks out, I'm going muskrat hunting soon, so we would've had muskrat.

([04:51](#)) or ([06:59](#)): [*SOUND: pan/sizzling*]

Melissa [stand-up]: Jessee had three burners going. In one pan, he had put some maple syrup with roasted sunflower seeds. In another larger one, he was frying the fish dusted with wild rice flour. In a third, he fried some onion and chopped tomatoes before adding hominy and Jacob's Cattle beans.

([04:51](#)) or ([06:59](#)): [*SOUND: pan/sizzling*]

Melissa ([10:27](#)): It's not completely traditional as we discussed. How do you describe it? Inspired?

Jessee ([10:56](#)): A modern undertaking or contemporary take on indigenous cuisine. ([14:09](#)): The modern palate versus even a hundred years ago is very different. And the way we use seasonings, the way we cook, so we've got to keep up with the times.

([12:13](#)) [*SOUND: stirring* or one of these? ([21:32](#)) Vitamix; ([22:05](#)) sounds of pan; Vitamix ([23:45](#))]

Melissa [stand-up]: I should take a minute to describe the intricate tattoo on Jessee's left forearm. It's a ring of circles touching and at the center of each are flowers. And closer to his wrist are a ring of triangles, also touching. I asked him to explain what it symbolized.

Jessee ([24:23](#)): It represents our connection with the plant world. Plants along with animals, along with people, along with rocks and mountains all have soul. So, when you refer to plants, it's plant people, animals, it's the animal people, deer people, bear people, etc. So, we all have soul. We're all people and we're all dependent on each other. Even though we hunt, and we grow crops. And when you hunt an animal, when you grow and harvest a crop, you treat everything with the utmost respect, giving thanks....So that's what that's representative of.

Melissa [stand-up]: When Jessee was done cooking, he plated the dish meticulously – like chefs do. Over a sunny yellow base of cream-enriched squash puree, he scooped some of the tomato, hominy and bean mixture next to the deeply browned piece of walleye. As a final touch, he topped the fish with the maple-glazed sunflower seeds.

Melissa: (27:00) Wow. All right. I have to like pause and pick up a different piece of technology and take a photo. Hold on one second. (29:34) Now we get to taste it, right?

Melissa (SECOND Jessee transcript 00:02): We've moved up to the dining area...and we have the beautiful dish in front of us. (02:54) Well, I'm going to talk with my mouthful. Um, it's really good. It's sweet....really good textual variety.

Jessee (03:13): Can I talk a little bit more about like wild game and food?

Melissa (03:21): Absolutely...I'll just sit here and eat...I absolutely want to hear about that because part of the reason I'm here narrating with my mouth half full is that we want to talk about what it looks like to go vegan for all the different reasons: economic, environmental, public health. And for those who have a strong connection to their cultural heritage, that might not be something they feel comfortable with.

Jessee (04:00): For me, the hunting of game and the eating of animals is something that is almost sacred. I'm not a great hunter by any stretch of the imagination ... But one thing that I really gain from hunting is I know where my food comes from and then also I have a connection to that animal, you know, from taking its life to ... field dressing it, then taking the hide off and then butchering it...Not only is like the meat important, but also everything else that animal offers is important.

Melissa (06:36): So for you, the ability to either hunt yourself or fish and use those animals, not just for eating but in many productive ways, is a critical part of how you are continuing to celebrate your cultural heritage?

Jessee: (07:22) I learned from family members who were indigenous, and I hope to teach my children who are indigenous. So, it's, you know, that lost knowledge and then the reconnection and then the passing of that knowledge to future generations. (08:09): The other thing about, you know, hunting or trapping, it's about conservation as well.... keeping the population in check is beneficial to our wellbeing as humans ...But it's the connection is the main part. Just being on the land. Just the sounds, the sights, you know, the hunt. It's very, very spiritual.

Melissa [stand-up]: I thought Jessee explained really well why, for him, the idea of going vegan doesn't feel right. Other people have different reasons.

One of the ones I sometimes hear is that eating vegan is unhealthy, so I wanted to explore that a little bit. I read a bunch of academic nutrition articles – so you don't have to. And here's the bottom-line: there is no scientific evidence that a well-balanced vegan diet will harm your health. That said, there may be challenges to eating vegan, especially if you're brand new to it.

Back in November, I interviewed a registered dietitian to get the practical perspective of someone actually working with people to improve their eating habits.

Kerry: (00:13) My name is Kerry Detweiler. I am a registered dietitian and certified athletic trainer practicing within the Edge Preventative Care.

Melissa [stand-up]: The majority of Kerry's clients are omnivores, but she said she's seeing growing interest in plant-based diets. When she first starts working with someone who is vegetarian or vegan, or is considering a shift in that direction, she likes to understand their motivation. That helps her help them.

Kerry: (06:05) Is it health reasons? Is it environmental? Is it, um, animal rights and activism and like animal safety? Or religious? That's another component as well. To suss out what their motivating factor is because that can kind of influence how much bandwidth or leeway they have in regards to what they're willing to try. (06:58) So that's often kind of my first question is, "That sounds really awesome. What prompted that decision?"

Melissa [stand-up]: Whatever someone's reasons for not eating animal products, Kerry believes it can be a healthy choice.

Kerry: (09:41) Yeah, absolutely...I think you can be a meat eater. You don't have to be, if you don't want to be...(24:18) There's some really great benefits. So ethically, environmentally, to your food budget as well. I mean, some of our plant-based foods, especially our plant-based proteins can be really budget-friendly. Ground beef is, I dunno, like \$4 a pound, \$5 a pound, whereas a bag of dried beans is like a \$1.09 and you're going to get significantly more servings out of it. Plant-based foods...are going to benefit our LDL cholesterol or heart-healthy cholesterol as opposed to high levels of trans fats and saturated fats. The trans fats coming from more processed convenient items, which do exist in the vegan world. (25:15) I'm told Oreos are vegan. I was reminded by a client who is vegan, and she was like, "So I want to stop doing that." And I was like, "OK, let's talk."

Melissa: (25:26) I do think that's an interesting thing. Like just eating vegan, you can do that poorly. Just the same as you can eat an omnivorous diet poorly, right?

Kerry: (25:34) Oh, absolutely. I had another patient who is vegetarian, and she was like, "I realized I was like a carb addict."

Melissa [stand-up]: Kerry explained that this particular patient was compensating for things she felt she was missing, so she worked with her on that.

Kerry: (07:29) It's totally doable. I just think it requires a bit more attention to detail and planning. In our Americanized busy society, I hear a lot in general from even non-vegetarian, vegan eaters: just don't have time, time being of the essence. We're busy, we're running all over the place...And if we're intending on making some dietary changes, that's going to require an investment of time. (08:33) With a vegan diet, I think there's a bit more of a learning curve for those who are unfamiliar.

Melissa [stand-up]: She said a lot of people need help with cooking skills.

Kerry: (22:02) Another comment I've heard from some who are leaning plant-based is like, "Well, the food tastes boring." Well, we got to spice and season it up a little bit... We need to enhance it with some garlic, some onion, some herbs, some spices, some soy sauce, um, or aminos, or the nutritional yeast, of course.

Melissa [stand-up]: Did I mention that Kerry loves nutritional yeast?

Kerry (20:43): I am a huge fan of nutritional yeast. (21:03) Nutritional yeast is super nutrient dense, has loads of B vitamins, a little bit of iron, is really high in protein.

Melissa: (20:48) You're a hippie!

Kerry: (20:50) I don't know that anyone's called me a hippie before. I'll take it though.

Melissa [stand-up]: At the end of our conversation, Kerry summed it all up really well.

Kerry: (22:34) I fully believe food has to look good, taste good, feel good. If it doesn't look good, we're not gonna eat it. If it doesn't taste good, we're not gonna eat it. And hopefully, it makes our bodies feel good, too.

Melissa [stand-up]: To round up this discussion about how the choice to vegan might look for some people, I wanted to share a bit more about the vegan challenge I mentioned at the beginning of the episode.

My husband and I had decided to give it a try for most of February. I have several good friends who are vegan, so I occasionally cook for them and I make at least a couple vegetarian meals a week, but I knew it would be really different to eat vegan full-time. I recorded some of our impressions about 10 days in.

Mark (00:51): Hi, I'm Mark. I'm being forced to do this interview for the sake of my long-term happiness.

Melissa [stand-up]: It's true. He was my most reluctant subject. But it had actually been his idea to try a month of eating vegan in the first place. He's a doctor, a primary care provider.

Mark (01:40): Well, we've talked about it a lot in work and with people there about whether or not plant-based would be healthy.

Melissa [stand-up]: We launched our experiment with brunch at Knead Bakery, a vegan place in the Old North End, which was great.

Mark: (03:22) Yeah, I had a sweet potato sandwich that was delicious.

Melissa [stand-up]: Other restaurant experiences over the weeks were more challenging: vegan is definitely harder than vegetarian and usually the choices were pretty limited. Shout-out to the



buffet at Stone Stoup in Burlington, though, which had a great variety. Cooking at home for me was a fun challenge, but obviously I'm into cooking. I will admit that I felt lucky that it was just us two and I wasn't feeding our family. I remember when our two sons were young teens and I tried to cook more meat-free meals — that did not go over so well.

Melissa (03:42): In terms of highlights of dinner, that first night I made a recipe from another local restaurant called Revolution Kitchen that my colleague Sally at Seven Days had run in a newspaper article, which was kind of a Buffalo cauliflower with a tahini quote unquote blue cheese dressing, spinach, some rice and beans. And that was pretty stellar, huh?

Mark (04:12): Yeah, that was delicious. I think it's funny though, cause it's not really blue cheese. And one of the challenges I think is saying that something is something that it's not, instead of just being delicious.

Melissa (04:24): Really good point. Yup. I agree. Speaking of which, one of my low lights of the week is fake yogurt... The texture is just kind of dismal.

Mark: (10:40) So the thing I miss most is eggs, because I have traditionally been a pretty big breakfast fan and probably have eggs three times a week, I would say there's not a simple substitute that's sorta quick in the same way I would get at work, um, to replace that.

Melissa [stand-up]: Mark did also concede that if it had just been him doing this alone, he would have eaten a lot of peanut butter and frozen bean burgers.

Mark (05:45): It's not hard when you have someone who tries hard to make delicious stuff. So, it's a lot different than me having to do it on my own.

Melissa [stand-up]: I was, of course, posting all about this experience on social media, which is how I ended up with Jesse cooking walleye. I wrote a blog that went up on the 7 Days website and people started responding with recipes and tips, which was fun. What surprised me most in the end was similar to what Mark said about eggs. Missing meat and our main meals were really not my issue, at least for the month. It was quick snacks, grabbing something on the go that was hardest. I count on hard cooked eggs or a chunk of cheddar with my apple to power me through. Another thing I kind of anticipated was that, while I could get a fair amount of local vegetables even in February, as well as some Vermont beans, my food connection to Vermont was definitely not as strong during those weeks.

Mark (13:32): It does make you think like when we're not eating local eggs and eating avocados from far away, like what's the goal of that change at that moment? So, you might have health benefits, might have other things, but it doesn't necessarily feel right from the local standpoint. So, I think it'd be even more challenging if we were to stick and try to eat all our stuff only local to, cause that would be just another set of limits. Plus, we have great cheese in Vermont, so we would definitely be limiting ourselves to some of the things we're really good at here locally.

Melissa [stand-up]: And that's a great place for me to do a teaser for the next episode where I'll share some of the conversation I had with Seth and Jeanette Johnson (and their awesome kids) at Morningstar Farm in Glover. Interestingly, they're vegetarian but raise beef alongside their beans

and grain to create closed-loop sustainability on their farm. Here's Seth in the cow barn right before Christmas.

[SOUND: gate clanging, moo]

Seth: (00:36) Basically, we have developed this herd of beef cows, as much for their fertility as anything else. We really have noticed a dramatic increase. We've had these cows for about eight years, but just in the last couple of years we've noticed a dramatic increase in both the quality and the quantity of our forages, which is hay, corn, silages, and then also our grains and beans as well have really benefited from having a source of good quality source of on-farm manure. Being organic, it's really difficult to import nutrients onto the farm.

[SOUND: theme music]

Melissa [stand-up]: And we'll also hear from a couple different folks who work in tourism and agriculture for the state, as well as a forester, about the value of the landscape to the cultural and economic fabric of Vermont – and what changes to that landscape might mean.

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